

Barthes: rhetoric, style, society

Article

Accepted Version

McKeane, J. (2019) Barthes: rhetoric, style, society. *Barthes Studies*, 5. ISSN 2058-3680 Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/86231/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Published version at: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/barthes/article/barthes-rhetoric-style-society/>

Publisher: Cardiff University

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

5. Barthes: Rhetoric, Style, Society

John McKeane

What is rhetoric for Roland Barthes? On one view, it is a set of instructions on how to write based on a unitary tradition of Greek, Latin, and French classical culture. Although its longevity and the subtleties developed over this time might be admirable, it is nonetheless a thing of the past, the marker of the old European world that has been swept aside by modernity. On another view, however, rhetorical habits have been so thoroughly ingrained into literary, philosophical, and political traditions that they have become indelible. Rhetoric provides not only rules for writing but also a meta-language for talking about literature; it precedes and predicts modern schools of literary theory.

In truth, although both of these views can be found in Barthes's writing, it is difficult (as well as undesirable) to firmly place him in either camp. Rhetoric is not just another theme, just another thread to be followed through his work. Instead it is something like a spectral, ancestral presence, fleetingly glimpsed in the bone structure of areas as diverse as literary theory, poetics, stylistics, creative writing, political discourse, sociology, intersubjectivity, logic, and more. It is everything and nothing.

It is thus all the more important to proceed with care. Our first section will look at the way he defines rhetoric in terms of its alleged death in the 19th Century, as well as at more recent work on the same question. The second part of the article will then be dedicated to Barthes's exploration of the influence of rhetoric on contemporary writing, and to his unusual conclusions concerning style and its social function. In the two sections we shall draw on texts from a variety of periods of Barthes's work, for instance well-known pieces such as *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* and his work on Albert Camus' *Étranger*, but also materials emerging from his teaching such as the 1964-65 seminar 'L'ancienne rhétorique'.¹ Our hope is that Barthes will emerge as a figure whose attraction towards open expanses of thought was hard-won against the complacent discourse of rationalism and clarity incarnated in French literary tradition. After all, it is possible to find him lamenting the fact that 'a theory of literature' is 'such a neglected object in France' and that in France, until recently, 'no formalism, of any sort, had been able to develop in literary studies'.² Faced with such a situation, and surprisingly given rhetoric's association with conservative tradition, Barthes draws on certain definitions of rhetoric as a resource, perhaps even as an ally. Let us therefore begin by exploring his attempts to define this phenomenon, tortuous though they may be.

1a. The Historical Duration of Rhetoric

We can begin by noting that Barthes puts forward varying, even contrasting interpretations of rhetoric's duration as a historical phenomenon. We shall therefore ultimately need to ask: for Barthes, is rhetoric dead or not? The question is of course politically loaded: rhetoric's historical pedigree has often meant that it has functioned as a marker of class. Indeed, he refers to it as 'the privileged (since one has to pay to acquire it) technique that allows the ruling classes to make certain their *ownership of speech* [...] an initiation that consecrates bourgeois culture'.³ This is his motivation for concluding the 1964-65 seminar on ancient rhetoric with the following call to arms: 'reducing Rhetoric to the rank of a merely historical object; seeking, in the name of *text*, of *writing*, a new practice of language; and never separating ourselves from revolutionary science – these are one and the same task'.⁴ Any argument for the continued relevance of rhetoric must therefore redefine it powerfully enough to counter its conservative associations. As we shall see, the new concepts of 'text' and 'writing' mentioned here will not be so firmly divided from rhetoric as it might appear.

At certain moments, Barthes can be found proposing a theory of rupture, according to which the longstanding tradition of rhetoric died out with the onset of modernity. Thus, in a summary of a seminar, we can read that 'this system had withered since the Renaissance, to then die off over the course of the 19th Century'.⁵ The thought is given fuller voice in a published text of 1967, 'L'Analyse rhétorique':

The classical code (in the broad sense) has lasted for centuries in the West for centuries, since it is the same rhetoric which brings to life an oration by Cicero or a sermon by Bossuet; but it is likely that this code underwent a profound mutation in the second half of the nineteenth Century, even if, to this very day, certain traditional writing are subjugated to it.⁶

The enormous weight of the modern world, and the rupture it represents, is thus shown in the distortion of dates: Cicero and Bossuet appear closer together, because they are bound to one another (and others) by rhetoric, than Bossuet appears to us, standing on the other side of a narrow but deep divide.

But Barthes also argues the contrary, which is to say that the rhetorical tradition persists, its continuity downplaying overexcited talk of modern rupture, perhaps with the thought that ruptures and revolutions are precisely what history is made of. Concentrating in 'Responsabilité de la grammaire' on the legacy of French classicism from the 17th Century to the 20th, Barthes writes that

Since what we must say was a completely political formation of our classical language, no serious revolution in rhetoric, not that of the romantics and not that of the symbolists, has dispelled the fraud of a language claiming to be universal, when it is just privileged. [...] Saint-Just spoke the language of Fénelon, the grammar used by Gide, Mauriac, and Duhamel is that of Port-Royal, and Camus himself writes novels more or less like Flaubert or Stendhal do.⁷

It is true that this comes from an early (1947) text, only a few years after 'Plaisir aux classiques' (1944), when Barthes's attitude to French classicism is arguably somewhat scholastic; should we therefore disregard this statement as not belonging to the mature thought of later decades? Militating against this view is the fact that the remark about Camus being a classic will return and be expanded on, but not essentially altered, in the major text *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*. Beyond this, the 'Ancienne rhétorique' seminar of 1964-65 will make a similar argument for the continued relevance of rhetoric. Drawing this time not on the French classics but on the major, founding contribution to rhetoric made by Aristotle, Barthes writes as follows:

There is a kind of stubborn agreement between Aristotle (from whom rhetoric was proceeded) and so-called mass culture, as if Aristotelianism [...] survived in a corrupt, diffused, inarticulate state in the cultural practice of Western societies – a practice founded, through democracy, on an ideology of the ‘greatest number’, of the majority-as-norm, popular opinion: all the indications are that a kind of Aristotelian vulgate still defines a type of trans-historical Occident, a civilisation (our own) which is that of the *endoxa*; how to avoid this realization that Aristotle (by his poetics, by his logic, by his rhetoric) provides – starting from the notion of the *vraisemblable* – a full analytical grid to all language, whether narrative, discursive, or argument-based [...]?⁸

Here the apparent distance covered by the continuity of tradition is greater than that, previously mentioned, between Camus and Stendhal; not only are Aristotle and contemporary cultural practices more distant from one another chronologically, they are also more heterogeneous generically. But this does not matter to Barthes, for whom they share an essential dedication to the self-evident, to *le vraisemblable*, that which seems likely or probable, a best-going estimate rather than an actual knowledge of the situation. Not only is worldly experience thus placed in the foreground (in a way alien to Platonic philosophy, by contrast), but it also plays an important role in rhetoric. Classical models after all prescribe that the credentials of the speaker be established, separately from the content to be discussed. Often glossed as the importance of character (recurrent examples are those of trustworthiness, reticence to speak, experience, etc.), this aspect is instead read by Barthes in terms of the tone adopted by the speaker.⁹ In any case, the wider argument is that the basic experience of the common man, the silent majority, is valued equally to (or perhaps more greatly than) expert knowledge; that, for Barthes in this instance, is the proof of the survival of rhetoric into the modern age.

At different moments, it is therefore possible to find Barthes adopting different positions as to the continued (or not) influence of rhetoric. In fact, it is even possible to find him bringing these positions together at the same moment, in paradoxical statements. In one particular brief history of rhetoric, he argues that it ‘gobbled up regimes, religions, civilisations; having been moribund since the Renaissance, it has taken three centuries to die; and still it is not certain that it is dead.’¹⁰ In other words, although we may suspect that rhetoric no longer has the guiding role it previously did, we cannot be sure of this. This seems to leave us at an impasse regarding Barthes’s view of rhetoric. To proceed further, we can pick up a clue given several times in the materials quoted: on three occasions we have seen him refer to the 19th Century as the moment when something (either a death or if not, a significant alteration) happened to rhetoric. Let us see what he means by referring to this particular historical moment.

1b. On the 19th Century: Humeau, Compagnon

In order to understand what Barthes means by identifying this historical moment, we must take a detour outside of his work. More recent scholars have reconstituted in explicit terms the history that he felt able to refer to allusively. We shall briefly look at two such accounts of rhetoric’s status in the 19th Century: the first by a contemporary scholar, setting out a view of rhetoric’s role in education of that period, and then the second by Antoine Compagnon – a student of Barthes – discussing what replaced such rhetorical practices in education and literary thought.

Isabelle Humeau’s article “‘Composer à l’antique’” makes enlightening use of historical documents to depict rhetoric in action in the final period before compulsory Latin language and literature was removed from the baccalaureate in 1880 (it was then also removed from the *agrégation* and *licence* in 1907).¹¹ She thus sets the scene for a very different way of

dealing with literature than the one that has been known since: based around Latin and its broad historical horizons (rather than the national specificity of French literature); privileging a ‘discourse’ to be given rather than the now-canonical written dissertation; and requiring students to themselves compose (in Latin) literary texts, rather than to study discursively, in a literary-historical way. These pedagogic practices certainly shed light on certain textual artefacts, for instance Marcel Proust’s pastiches or Raymond Queneau’s *Exercices de style*. Of course, pupils did not begin by aping mature literary works; instead they learned to build up to this through a series of exercises. Humeau presents tables of these preparatory exercises, in which pupils were required to produce texts in a variety of genres. These included the edifying anecdote, the maxim, the confirmation or refutation of a commonly-held belief, the praising discourse (*éloge*), the vituperative discourse (*blâme*), the comparison, and so on. What interests us most here is the paradigm of a system of pre-established pathways for thought. The contrast with much current Anglo-American pedagogic thinking is certainly a stark one: instead of students being asked to build up from their own experience as individuals (and/or as consumers), in the 19th Century in France they were led along pre-established pathways. Of course, it is all too easy for this to be stultifying and to repress creativity and diversity (and in many situations it became precisely so). But equally, it can be seen positively, not relying on previously accumulated cultural capital that the student may or may not possess, but instead providing a technical understanding of how to write, not setting canonical authors in any fundamentally different category to the students, but simply as models to be followed, imitated, and surpassed.

Antoine Compagnon in *La Troisième République des lettres* traces the ways in which this system was dismantled, the arguments made against it, and the new doctrine of literary history that instead grew up thanks to the figure of Gustave Lanson.¹² In other words, this is a detailed account of the event cursorily but repeatedly referred to by Barthes, that is, the (incomplete) death of rhetoric in the nineteenth Century. Compagnon depicts Lanson’s success in re-centering the study of literature as a historically-based history of national literature, closely inscribed in the new national education system, and constructing national myths of rationalism, clarity, and universality.¹³ This success is what means that Compagnon is able to refer to literary history as ‘traditional’, a paradoxical usage, given that his work shows literary history to be anything but this, i.e. to itself be a historical phenomenon, and one dating only to the late nineteenth Century.¹⁴ Compagnon describes this situation as follows:

[literary history] does not rely on any concept of literature, because it is completely in the service of the teaching of literature [...] aiming [...] to define and to spread a mythology and an ideology that happen to be Republican and patriotic ones. This is because literary history is above all else an ideology (the idea of a national literature), and an ideology must first of all be approached historically. Faced with what is given for obvious and self-evident – national literature and literary history – there is no other option but to relativize things, which is to say to historicize them.¹⁵

The uncompromising nature of the critique is clear. Compagnon identifies literary history as ‘above all else an ideology’, one whose pretensions to scientific status and to the attendant respectability in the new Republican society ultimately cannot hide the fact that it has been invented. The aim of Compagnon’s book is to make this case and it does so exhaustively. However, it also poses the question of how we view the previous rhetorical system. Rhetoric’s set of predefined pathways might be seen to represent accumulated cultural knowledge. This would enable pupils in this system to avoid the trap of individualism, to avoid having to reinvent the wheel. The sheer weight of tradition having carved out these forms or pathways, they would have become ever more subtle and finely-tuned. And in their

very constraint, there might be a second-order freedom to be found, insofar as the individual is not responsible for creation from scratch, merely for rearrangement and adaptation.

Such, in any case, would be the argument to be made in favour of rhetoric proceeding from a reading of Humeau and Compagnon. But even if this argument is not adopted, their work is valuable in providing a framework for – and a resistance to – the desire for literature to be historical, situated, defined externally by society without having any right to speak back to that society. They also provide greater detail on the Barthes's sketched-out thesis of the strange death of rhetorical literature in the 19th Century. But if it seems reasonable to state that Barthes is operating in the space opened up in turn by post-literary-historical thinking – or, as it were, by a post-post-rhetorical thinking –, how precisely does he move within this space?

A key notion for Barthes is that of the distance separating literature written according to rhetorical practice from the sort of direct affirmation of experience or reality claimed – impossibly and in bad faith, according to Barthes – by representationalist literature. In the seminar on 'L'ancienne rhétorique', this distance is evoked by the rapid juxtaposition of two ways of approaching rhetoric:

Rhetoric is triumphant: it reigns over teaching. Rhetoric is moribund: limited to this sector, it is falling gradually into great intellectual discredit.¹⁶

In fact, the shift of perspectives here means that both statements can be true: rhetoric is doing well in terms of its dominance of the school system, and it is doing badly in terms of its legitimacy in the wider literary culture. The issue is the gap between these two worlds, and, given all that is known about Barthes's polemic over Racine and his association with the theoretical avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s, we might well take him here to be critiquing the conservatism of French education.

It is true that the extensive bibliography of manuals of rhetoric can and often does have a deadening effect. Barthes on multiple occasions demonstrates his familiarity with the kinds of taxonomies given in such settings. This can be seen when he discusses the ancient 'chria (*chréia*)' which is explained to be an 'exercise in virtuosity given to students which consisted in "passing" a theme through a series of *topoi* [*lieux*]: *quis ? quid ? ubi ? quibus auxiliis ? cur ? quomodo ? quando ?* [who? what? where? by what means? why? how? when?]'.¹⁷ He also mentions the tradition of commonplaces, which before becoming an expression implying stereotypes, referred to 'empty forms common to all arguments (the emptier they are, the more common)'.¹⁸ And shortly afterwards in his seminar he gives a summary of the major *topoi* of rhetoric as it flourished in the middle ages: that of false modesty, that of the mature youngster or the youthful old person, that of the *locus amoenus*; all of these are qualified as 'detachable pieces'.¹⁹ Given Barthes's identification of literature as indirectness, as a distancing from lived experience and a process of moving through a variety of forms, we can see these *topoi* or 'detachable pieces' as not deadening but in fact liberating. Perhaps everything has indeed already been thought and said – not least by La Bruyère, cited by Barthes: 'it has all been said, and we come too late'.²⁰ If this the case then the individual is no longer required to invent anything original, but can simply combine these detachable parts in the most appropriate combination. That indeed is what Barthes does in the second part of the early article 'Plaisir aux classiques', when following discursive consideration of classicism, he provides four pages of short quotations from French classical authors.²¹ Overall it seems possible that rhetoric, if its conservative understanding is successfully dismantled, can for Barthes represent a transformation of and movement away from individual experience, putting the individual writer or speaker into dialogue with a host of others. In the second part of this article, we shall explore how this thinking is present in Barthes's approach to

contemporary writing, and especially Camus, and how his thinking of rhetoric opens onto an approach to style, and – perhaps surprisingly – society.

2a. Rhetoric, Style, Society: Camus' Style

It is tempting for readers of certain late 20th-century literary theorists to take their style to be first of all homogeneous – which is not the case – and second, to be representative of the broader French literary and philosophical tradition. The circumlocutory, digressive, detailed writings that come to mind were often produced with the express intention of undermining the rationalist tradition of clarity. 'What is not clear is not French' is the famous dictum from Antoine Rivarol, and more recent characterizations of French style have seen it as a 'grey pencil' (Hippolyte Taine) or a 'piano without pedals' (Gide).²² According to such views, writing in French is able to express thought efficiently and with a minimum of fuss, leaving overwhelming detail or soggy sentimentality to English, German, or Italian literature and thought. Such characterizations of course have no intrinsic value; but they do have value insofar as they shape the formation and reception of literary works. Albert Camus, for instance, is discussed by Barthes primarily in terms of stylistic classicism.²³ These are the discussions we must explore in order to see how Barthes implements and expands some of the thinking of rhetoric seen above.

We can initially note that in 'Réflexions sur le style de *L'Étranger*' (1944) Barthes explicitly aligns the French-Algerian writer with the tradition of classical rhetoric:

The pleasure of style, even in avant-garde works, will only ever be obtained through fidelity to certain classical preoccupations such as harmony, correctness, simplicity, beauty, etc., in short, the long-standing components of taste. These conventions have been respected – better, served – by Camus [...]. [His book] submits itself to procedures as old as Lucretius, and [...] his writing does not break with the habits and aims of an intelligent literature, which is to say well-marshalled [*dirigée*] literature; the care taken to please one's audience [...], the interlocking rhetorical strategies, this entire work full of hope is on first sight in contradiction with the absurd.²⁴

Barthes then continues, arguing that Camus has succeeded in overcoming the contradiction between the heuristic or optimistic nature of classical language and the absurdism he is expounding. On this view, this contradiction is in fact downgraded to a pleasant balancing-out, meaning that 'this book has no style and yet it is well written'.²⁵ What could have developed into the dramatic sunderings of a writing in crisis in fact provides little more than the minimum of variety needed for there to be harmony. The ultimate effect is one of calm and balance, the *naturel* often sought by 17th-century classical authors. In Barthes's words:

the admirable product of this effort is like running water, a nothingness: no literature, but also no negligence; no phrase-making, but propositions; no formal trickery, but no disdain of form either; a style that does not go looking for images but does not fear them.²⁶

Identifying Camus' aesthetic strategy as no more controversial than 'running water, a nothingness' aligns it with the natural law of gravity making water flow downhill. It also picks up the metaphor from the previous page. Here Barthes had stated that:

a fine text is like sea water; its colour comes from the reflection of the bottom on the surface [...]. Precisely, the style of *L'Étranger* has something marine about it: it is a sort of neutral substance, one that becomes slightly dizzying through its monotony.²⁷

Later in the article the metaphor changes but the intention is similar:

[I]n *L'Étranger*, the cold lacquer of style works as an insulator; it cuts off any induction towards encouraging or explicative thoughts.²⁸

Those seeking to attack rhetorical writing as conservative would surely seize on these descriptions – Barthes seems to have had little or no sarcastic intention in referring to Camus' style as empty or vacuous. This is presented as a plus point, and the aversion to explanation or questioning is described as a sort of insulation, a protection or safety measure (again, critics would say this a characteristically conservative gesture).

In truth, however, Barthes positions Camus' style in relation to rhetoric in multiple ways. The first way is to say that this style *is* rhetoric and that it belongs to the tradition thanks to its concern for harmony, naturalness, economic clarity. The two would overlap to the point of being synonymous (recalling Cocteau's dictum 'one must have style but not a style').²⁹ The second way of relating style and rhetoric is to state that this stylistic approach is way of abandoning rhetoric, of sidestepping the industrious and ultimately futile attempts at constructing elegant language that an over-thought rhetorical approach can represent. This is what Barthes means when he states:

the phrases without verbs and without relative clauses [will appear] a handsome victory won against the chateaubriandesque delicacies (which are succulent ones, let us not forget).³⁰

This second definition therefore places style above and beyond mere rhetoric, as something like the calm good judgement of the writer who has mastered that art, drawing on it only when he needs (and perhaps not at all).

Indeed, this sense of equanimity (or even zen-like detachment) is identified by Barthes as being closer to the absurd than the tempestuous sense of crisis often imagined as describing that philosophy. We read as follows:

There is no reason that the absurd should abandon style; first of all the absurd is no master of asceticism; stylistic voluptuousness is not something it disdains; the absurd does not necessarily push man towards suicide, nor the creator towards the assassination of all form. Next, to sacrifice style would be within the order of rhetoric [...]. Style remains the difficult ridge on which absurd man must balance between infinite ideas and flimsy words.³¹

This is to say that to sacrifice style would be of the order of rhetoric: paradoxically, such a sacrifice would conform to a predefined paradigm, linking with the long tradition of those who have claimed to eschew style whilst doing anything but that. Rather than seeming to abandon form, only to end up retaining it, it might therefore be better to retain form, in order to become indifferent as to whether it is renounced or not. To content oneself with style is compared by Barthes to balancing on a 'difficult ridge'. We can take this to mean that one must retain one's balance, moving tentatively forward in the only direction available. One cannot simply step off to either side (either into the infinity of ideas or the flimsiness of language – a romantic dichotomy perhaps reflecting the early status of the text from which it is drawn). In short, if we cannot sacrifice style for fear of repeating a rhetorical gesture, then style is being painted as at once having a freer spirit than rhetoric, and ultimately behaving in a similar way (albeit at a different level), insofar as attempts to abandon either rhetoric or style become just another rhetorical or stylistic gesture. If this is the impasse into which we are driven by Barthes's article on style in Camus, let us see whether his writing on style in general leads in a different direction.

2b. Rhetoric, Style, Society: Style in General

For Barthes one of the advantages of what we might call an open definition of rhetoric are that it takes us beyond any bourgeois individualism. Rather than seeing literature as expression of any particular content, for instance expressing a subjectivity exterior to it, this definition as open moves us towards a view of interlocking layers of language; he uses the contrasting images of an apricot (with a hard centre) and an onion, with nothing but layers.³² Accordingly, the advantage of the rhetorical tradition is not that it serves to keep things the same, and thus to perpetuate the privilege of the powerful, but rather that it allows for the transmission of memory, experience, and technique from one generation to the next, and so on. In *Writing Degree Zero* he states that

Writing still remains full of the recollection of previous usage, for language is never innocent [...]. A stubborn after-image, which comes from all the previous modes of writing and even from the past of my own, drowns the sound of my present words. Any written trace precipitates, as inside a chemical at first transparent, innocent and neutral, mere duration gradually reveals in suspension a whole past of increasing density, like a cryptogram.³³

Taking cognizance of this aspect of language is thus a way of avoiding the naivety of the bourgeois individual, who thinks themselves unique only to fall into predictable patterns of behaviour. Barthes makes his thinking on this issue more specific, however, stating that the particular codifications of classical language somehow perform this general function of language a second time, or on a meta-level. He writes:

Classical language is always reducible to a continuum of persuasion, it postulates the possibility of dialogue, it establishes a universe in which men are not alone, where words never have the terrible weight of things, where to speak is always to encounter others. Classical language is a bringer of euphoria because it is immediately social. There is no classical genre or piece of writing which does not suppose a collective consumption, akin to speech; classical literary art is an object which circulates among several persons brought together on a class basis; it is a product conceived for oral transmission, for a consumption regulated by the contingencies of society: it is essentially a spoken language, in spite of its strict codification.³⁴

Not only does rhetorical, classical language take us beyond the individual, then, it also takes us into a society or collectivity made up of the other users of that language, and in doing so, it is said to bring us nothing less than 'euphoria'. This is why Barthes refers to the spoken nature of this codified language; although it may or may not in actual fact be spoken, this language is always communicative, always circulating as currency from one individual to another, from one text to another. Everything is compatible with everything else, the regimented forms of expression meaning that opposing thoughts can be compared, contrasted, harmonised (the obvious counter-argument is to ask whether really nothing is excluded or remains unconvertable into this currency). At this moment in Barthes's work, there is therefore a positive argument to be made for a particular definition of rhetorical literature.

That is not to say that it in any way provides a final resting-place for his thinking of writing and society. For, elsewhere in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, style again comes to take on a prominent role, as it had in his article on Camus explored above. Although at first sight a writer's style might seem to be synonymous with their use of rhetoric, Barthes takes the two in quite different directions. Where rhetoric ensures a writer's compatibility with a centuries-long tradition, style is more individual, in fact acting to isolate one from that tradition. Barthes writes that style

is [...], as it were, a vertical and longely dimension of thought. Its frame of reference is biological or biographical, not historical: it is the writer's 'thing', his glory and his prison, it is his solitude.³⁵

Here it is striking that one's biology and past function as degraded versions of determinism, able to act strongly upon one, but not capable of connecting one to any greater, universal History. Because these are still determinisms, Barthes does not fall back on any idea of a bourgeois individual able to decide on their fate; against that false rationalism, style 'plunges into the closed memory of the person, it achieves its opacity from a certain experience of matter'.³⁶ Style is said to be vertical, taking one up to the heights of individual expression (or perhaps down to its depths), while rhetoric is said to be horizontal, ensuring communication, exchange, movement. Although the passages seen so far seem to imply something menacing or incomplete about this function of style, Barthes does go on to speak of it in positive terms:

Through its biological origin, style resides outside art, that is outside the pact which binds the writer to society. We can therefore imagine authors who prefer the security of art to the solitude of style [...]. The Authority of style, that is, the entirely free relationship between language and its double in flesh, is what imposes the writer as a Freshness above History.³⁷

Here what was presented as the collegial horizontality of rhetorical art is repackaged in terms of a stultifying conformity, over and against which the radical singularity of a particular writer's style can represent, strikingly, 'a Freshness'.

At the conclusion of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, however, the same term of freshness is turned around and mobilized on the side of collective History, representing the noble cause of a true engagement with the world beyond oneself. The passage in question also avoids any unthinking return to the predetermined rhetorical forms, depicting them as inadequate to the task at hand:

The writer is forced by his writing into a cleft stick: either the object of the work is naively attuned to the conventions of its form, Literature remaining deaf to our present History, and not going beyond the myth of literature; or else the writer acknowledges the vast freshness of the present world, but finds that in order to express it he has at his disposal only a language which is splendid but lifeless. In front of the virgin piece of paper, at the moment of choosing the words which must frankly signify his place in History, and witness his acceptance of its materials, he notices a tragic disparity between what he is doing and what he can see. Before his eyes, the world of society now exists as a veritable Nature, and this Nature is speaking, it is constructing living languages from which the writer is excluded: on the contrary, History puts in his hands a decorative and comprising instrument, a writing inherited from a previous and different History, for which he is not responsible and yet which is the only one he can use. Thus is born a tragic element in writing, since the mindful writer must henceforth struggle against ancestral and all-powerful signs which, from the depths of a past foreign to him, impose upon him Literature as ritual, and not as reconciliation.³⁸

However noble might be the aspiration of ending the writer's alienated status, of aligning her tools with the task at hand, at bringing her work into full circulation within the society of which it is part, in short of proceeding 'freely', Barthes adopts no false optimism as to the likelihood of any of this. Although he had written intriguingly of individual style and its potential for Freshness, here both style and rhetoric are contained within the category of literature as a 'decorative and compromising tool'. This time the contradiction between aspiration and reality, between potential and actuality, is not subsumed into an equanimous category of harmony or balance. Instead tragedy is the model used to relate these two aspects to one another, even as they remain worlds apart (we can recall that tragedy has been usefully defined, elsewhere, as the aspiration for justice when there is none).³⁹ The balance is tipped towards dislocation; the distance between contemporaneity and the eternal present of literature is no longer vivifying, but instead provokes a sense of impossibility and entrapment.

3. Conclusion

The interest and the difficulty of questions of rhetoric and style is that they are not limited to Barthes's work, but touch a thousand writers – anyone who writes. They force us to consider some of the unsolvable conundrums of literature (what are genres, and how far do they vary over time?) and philosophy (are our actions predetermined – in this case by the pre-existing structures of language – or free?). These topics also bring us face to face with paradoxes: the claim to have abandoned rhetoric itself being a rhetorical trope, or Cocteau's idea of not having *a* style, just *style*. But perhaps most interestingly, the question of rhetoric and style causes us to question literature's relation to society: as we have seen, Barthes states that classical literature is always already written with a conversational debate in mind, and he argues that a certain definition of style can be akin to a biological determinism, walling off the writer even as she tries to communicate with the reader. The question is therefore not whether literature reflects society, but instead how far it tightens and loosens social bonds, how far when we are reading we are together or alone, how far when we are reading we can and cannot say *we*.

¹ Barthes's relation to grammar forms an interesting companion to that in rhetoric; see Gilles Philippe, *Sujet, verbe, complément: le moment grammatical de la littérature française, 1890-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), chapter VIII, and Mathieu Messenger, “‘Par elle me vient une existence dramatique’ : Barthes et la grammaire” in *Revue Roland Barthes*, 1 (2014), consulted online on 26 July 2019 at https://www.roland-barthes.org/article_messenger.html#partie2. Messenger writes that ‘reflections on adjectives, assertions, the aorist, the past historic, personal pronouns or even the neuter, indirectly make up the fragmented portrait of the author’ (my translation).

² Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. IV, p. 144, and vol III, p. 55. All translations in this article are my own unless marked otherwise.

³ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric: an aide-mémoire’ in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 11-94 (p. 14), trans. mod. He also refers to the ‘rhetoric year’ (OC II 1272), which was the name given to the penultimate year of secondary education, preparing pupils for the crowning ‘classe de philosophie’ in the final year. French literature is still studied in the penultimate year, before being replaced in the final-year curriculum by philosophy.

⁴ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 93.

⁵ Barthes, OC II 875.

⁶ Barthes, ‘Rhetorical Analysis’ in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 83-89 (p. 87).

⁷ Barthes, ‘Responsabilité de la grammaire’ [1947], OC I 97.

⁸ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 92, trans. mod.

⁹ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 74. See also Jennifer Richards, *Rhetoric* (London : Routledge, 2008).

¹⁰ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 15, trans. mod.

¹¹ “‘Composer à l’antique’ : vestiges des *progymnasmata* dans les sujets de composition latin au baccalauréat (Faculté de Paris, 1853-1880)”, in Martine Jey, Pauline Bruley and Emmanuelle Kaës (eds.), *L’Écrivain et son école : Je t’aime moi non plus* (Paris: Hermann, 2017), pp. 183-208.

¹² Antoine Compagnon, *La Troisième République des lettres : de Flaubert à Proust* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

¹³ Lanson inherited a professorship at the Sorbonne known as the chair of French eloquence – a title that tellingly he eventually replaced with ‘Chair of literary history of the 18th Century’; Compagnon, *La Troisième République des lettres*, p. 61.

¹⁴ Compagnon, *La Troisième République des lettres*, p. 8.

¹⁵ Compagnon, *La Troisième République des lettres*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁶ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 43, trans. mod.

¹⁷ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 66, trans. mod.

¹⁸ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 67. See also the pedagogic practice of keeping commonplace books.

¹⁹ Barthes, ‘The Old Rhetoric’, p. 68.

²⁰ Barthes, OC II 474.

²¹ Barthes, OC I 63-67.

²² See, respectively, A. Rivarol in Sudhir Hazareesingh, *How the French Think* (London: Penguin, 2016), p. 7; Gide (attrib.) in Gilles Philippe, *Le Rêve du style parfait*, p. 201; and Taine in Gilles Philippe, *French Style: l’accent français de la prose anglaise* (Brussels: Les impressions nouvelles, 2016), p. 232.

²³ Gilles Philippe questions the completeness of this reading of *L'Étranger*: 'There is certainly a manifest distance between the writing of the novel's first pages ('I took the bus at 2 o'clock. It was very hot') and that of the last pages ('As if this great anger had purged me of evil, emptied me of hope, before this night laden with signs and stars, I opened myself up for the first time to the world's tender indifference') in *Le Rêve du style parfait*, p. 122.

²⁴ Barthes, OC I 75-76.

²⁵ Barthes, OC I 76. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe criticizes what he sees as Barthes's openness to the French tradition of good taste in *Entretiens de l'île Saint-Pierre*, a dialogue with Jean-Christophe Bailly as part of the film *Proème* by Christine Baudillon and François Lagarde (Montpellier: Hors oeil, 2006).

²⁶ Barthes, OC I 76.

²⁷ Barthes, OC I 75.

²⁸ Barthes, OC I 71.

²⁹ See Gilles Philippe, *Le Rêve du style parfait*, p. 202.

³⁰ Barthes, OC I 78.

³¹ Barthes, OC I 78.

³² Barthes, OC III 980-1

³³ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 17.

³⁴ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, p. 41, trans. mod.

³⁵ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, p. 12.

³⁶ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, p. 13.

³⁷ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, pp. 13-14, trans. mod.

³⁸ Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology*, pp. 71-72, trans. mod.

³⁹ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Un Théâtre de situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 19.

John McKeane is lecturer in modern French literature at the University of Reading. He is the author of numerous articles on the relations between literature and philosophy, particularly in the work of Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Sarah Kofman, Roland Barthes, and Marcel Proust. He is also the author of *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: (Un)timely Meditations* (2015). He co-edited *Blanchot romantique* (2010) and will also co-edit a special issue of *Paragraph* on *Sarah Kofman and the Relief of Philosophy* (2021). He is the translator of various books including *Maurice Blanchot: a Critical Biography* (2018). Lastly, he is working on a project on education in France.